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SGRAFFITO PLATES  
MADE BY  
DAVID SPINNER

#### PENNSYLVANIA SLIP-WARE

THE October BULLETIN contained a brief statement concerning three pieces of English slip-decorated ware recently acquired by the Museum. The purchase of eight examples of Pennsylvania slip-decorated ware<sup>1</sup> gives opportunity for a discussion of the slip-ware, sometimes referred to as Tulip Ware, made during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries by the Pennsylvania "Dutch" in close adherence to the traditions they had brought from their fatherland. The authority on this subject is Dr. Edwin AtLee Barber, from whose book, *Tulip Ware of the Pennsylvania-German Potters*, copious extracts will be quoted. In his preface he states, "The existence of the ancient art of Slip-Decoration in America was not known to ceramic students until the year 1891, when the present writer's attention was first attracted to the subject . . . through the purchase of a red earthenware pie plate. This piece, embellished with floral and bird devices in the sgraffito style, and an inscription in German, with date 1826, was at first supposed to be an example of European workmanship, but careful examination revealed the fact that some of the words scratched in

the border were in Pennsylvania 'Dutch.' From this clue a series of investigations was instituted which resulted in the interesting discovery that this curious art, which had been brought from Germany, was flourishing in Eastern Pennsylvania before the middle of the eighteenth century."

The early German settlers in the Palatines of Pennsylvania, possessing but little literature, and that of a devotional character, resorted to "another method of transmitting ideas for the amusement of the common people", which Dr. Barber terms "ceramic literature." He explains his expression as follows: "By the union of expressive pictographs and inscribed words, the workers in clay recorded the customs of the people, much of their folk-lore, and their artistic progress. By means of these ceramic inscriptions they preserved many of the old German sayings or *sprichwörter*, which otherwise would have been forgotten." They used "the same time-honored methods and decorative motives in this, their adopted land, as had been employed by their forefathers for generations. . . . And on their earthen wares they inscribed in the dialect of the people, the homely proverbs and mottoes and rude rhymes, quotations from the Bible and lines from old German hymns, which had ornamented the coarse pottery of their

<sup>1</sup>These may be seen in the Room of Recent Accessions.



SGRAFFITO PLATE  
MADE BY  
HENRY ROUDEBUTH, 1793



SGRAFFITO PLATE  
MADE BY  
DAVID SPINNER



SGRAFFITO PLATE  
MADE BY  
SAMUEL TROXEL, 1818



SGRAFFITO PLATE  
INSCRIBED  
ANDREW U, FEB. 28, 1810

ancestors." From the old dishes we may therefore learn "much of their customs, of the various animals which they raised, of the flowers which they cultivated, and the costumes which were in vogue a century and a half ago."

Of slip-decorated ware there are two varieties, slip-traced or slip-painted and slip-engraved, scratched, or sgraffito. "Slip-tracing consists in trickling liquid clay or slip through a quill, which is attached to a little cup, over the surface of the unburned ware to produce the decorative designs, the slips being of the consistency of thick cream or batter of a lighter tint than the coarse clay to which it is applied, which latter is generally of a dark orange or red color. Slip-engraving consists in covering the ware completely with a thin coating or engobe of slip, through which the ornamental devices are scratched with a pointed instrument, to show the darker clay beneath. . . . In Pennsylvania, sgraffito ware was being made as early as 1733, as is indicated by an interesting example, . . . which is inscribed with that date, and it is more than probable that for several years previous to that time the transplanted art had flourished here."

These pieces have a peculiar human interest, for they were not made for the trade, as were the plain utensils turned out by the same potters, but "were executed during odd moments and leisure hours by the proprietor or his journeymen, as gifts or presentation pieces for household decoration. They were usually designed for some friend, sweetheart, a wife, or the daughter, or mistress of an employer and they were occasionally executed to fill a special order from some well-to-do patron. Such pieces were highly prized and carefully preserved from one generation to another."

The decoration on this early ware has a crudeness and a naïve childishness that betoken that it was "the spontaneous expression of latent talent rather than the result of technical training. (The ceramic

artist) knew no rule of procedure and his hand was untrammelled by the limitations of any school of art." Among the decorative motives employed were conventionalized flowers and foliage most frequently the tulip and the fuchsia, but often flowers that grew only in the imagination of the potter; birds, especially the eagle as representative of liberty, the turtledove as the emblem of love, and the peacock, raised extensively in the German settlements and sometimes looked upon as a weather prophet;<sup>1</sup> animals, such as the deer, rabbit, lion, dog, and horse, the latter occurring most frequently, but with the least success as it was the most difficult animal form attempted; men and women, poorly drawn, indeed, but possessing a fascination by the very audacity of the untutored potter in attempting the difficult poses of spirited action; and marginal inscriptions, by no means least important not only for historical interest, but also for decorative effect.

Some inscriptions seem to have been the common stock in trade of the potters. For example,

Aus der ehrt mit verstant  
Macht der Haefner aller Hand.

Out of earth with understanding  
The potter makes everything,

or again this playful warning,

Die Schüssel ist von Ert gemacht  
Wann sie verbricht der Häefner lacht  
Darum nempt sie in acht.

The dish is made of earth.  
When it breaks the potter laughs.  
Therefore take care of it.

On the other hand, certain inscriptions were undoubtedly inspired by individual circumstances, as an example of the work of Henry Roudebuth, which reads,

Es ist mier ser bang  
Meine Wieste Tochter grigt kein Mann. H. R.  
1813

I am very much afraid  
My naughty daughter will get no man,

or the wording on a dish intended as a bridal present,

<sup>1</sup>Dr. Barber quotes the German proverb, Wenn der Pohahn Kräht, gibts Regen — The cry of the peacock presages rain.

Aufrichtig gegen jedermann  
 Vertraulich gegen wanich  
 Verschwiegen sein so vül mann kahn  
 Als wer ich bin der bin ich  
 Und dasz ist wahr.

Ao. 1769

True to every man  
 Familiar to few,  
 To be reserved as much as possible,  
 Then it is known that what I am, that I am,  
 And that is true.

The simplest piece of sgraffito ware in the possession of the Museum is a shaving-dish with the customary notch on one side to fit the neck of the person shaving. It has as decoration one spray of tulip and a marginal inscription appropriate to its use: *Ich weiss nit in der welt mein bart der ist gar din gestelt 1791*. Translation: I do not know why in the world my beard is growing so thin.

Plates made by Henry Roudebuth and Samuel Troxel show the typical motives of flowers, foliage, and birds. The colors are the red of the clay, the yellow of the slip, and on certain portions of the design, a green produced by the use of oxide of copper or verdigris.

The pottery of David Spinner, situated on Willow Creek, in Milford township, on Spinner's farm, is represented by four plates, of which one is slip-painted in a pattern of lines, dots, and curves; the other three, slip-engraved, each showing a brave

attempt to portray not only flowers, birds, and animals, but men and women as well, dashing soldiers in cocked hats and a lady gaily attired in the costume of the period. The flower forms exhibit considerable variety and rather more grace of outline than the productions of many another potter of the period. Dr. Barber informs us, "David was considered quite an artist by his contemporaries and decorated the ware with his own hand. He possessed a marked ability for off-hand sketching that exceeded the artistic attainments of the neighboring potters and he frequently placed his name beneath his designs on plates and other pieces." One of the Museum plates bears a flowing signature: *D. Spinner 1801*. Oddly enough, the tulip, so common a motive with Pennsylvania-German potters, is not found once on Spinner's ware; the fuchsia takes its place as the most customary floral motive.

"Slip decoration in its primitive stages is now a lost art in the United States. Its decadence commenced with the advent of pewter and when the cheaper grades of white crockery began to be introduced the products of the German potteries ceased to be in demand." It was, however, "the forerunner of the modern art of painting on the unbaked ware with colored clays, as exemplified in the Rookwood pottery of the present day."



SHAVING DISH  
 SGRAFFITO, 1791